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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [HR](#)

SUBJECT: ELECTIONS: OSCE CONCERNS ABOUT REFUGEE VOTING

Classified By: Nicholas M. Hill, Polecon Counselor, for reasons 1.5 (B) and (D).

Summary

[11.](#) (C) Most international and local observers looking at preparations for elections in Croatia are generally satisfied that the voting on November 23 will be fair and transparent. ODIHR is comfortable enough with the process to have decided not to bring in short-term monitors for election day. There has been criticism, however, of the GoC for foot-dragging on providing the means for ethnic Serbian refugees residing outside Croatia to vote. Croatian authorities have felt the heat, including by the OSCE Head of Mission here, for not opening up more polling stations in Serbia to enable more refugee voting. The Croatians have rejected proposals to open more polling stations -- pleading fiscal constraints and lack of interest in the affected refugee population. End Summary.

General Satisfaction, but...

[12.](#) (C) Most independent observers give Croatian authorities high marks for the preparations involved in making sure that elections set for November 23 are fair. An ODIHR long-term observer mission in Croatia has convened a couple of meetings of the local diplomatic corps and gone over a laundry list of issues that would ordinarily be of concern, including election coverage in the media. Officials are generally satisfied (see www.osce.org for more) and the OSCE decided after a September visit that election-day monitoring would not be necessary. Similarly, GONG, the leading local NGO looking at election procedures, has expressed its satisfaction. Where concerns have been raised and not answered by authorities have been over preparations to enable voting of ethnic Serb refugees outside of Croatia -- particularly in Serbia, where 90 percent of them reside.

[13.](#) (C) At the last ODIHR briefing of the diplomatic community on November 13, OSCE Head of Mission Peter Semneby went over efforts to get Croatian authorities to expand the number of voting stations in Serbia -- it was an issue that his mission and not ODIHR was taking the lead on. Semneby told us that he and the EC Head of Mission had jointly raised their concerns with a number of people at the MFA and at the State Election Commission (SEC) on November 6. The Head of the SEC Election Commission, Ivica Crnic -- who also chairs Croatia's Supreme Court -- had sent a letter to the MFA requesting that it consider adding more polling stations to facilitate easier voting by Serbian refugees, although Semneby conceded to us that the request in the letter had been fairly general. Semneby recommended that authorities consider adding stations in northern Serbia in Sremska Mitrovica, Sombor, and Novi Sad.

[14.](#) (C) For its part, the MFA has resisted adding more stations in Serbia, and hidden behind the argument that any final determination would be the Election Commission's to make. We have talked to the head of the Neighboring Countries Office, Davor Vidis, about the issue several times in recent weeks and received the same answer -- that the MFA would do whatever the Election Commission requested of it, but that so far no precise request had come in. He told us that there would be polling stations at the Croatian Embassy in Belgrade, and consulates in Subotica, in Vojvodina, and Kotor, in Montenegro. To the argument that many refugees are located over 100 kilometers from any of the planned station, he was dismissive: they can "get in their cars and go vote."

Too Costly?

[15.](#) (C) On November 7, Semneby and the Head of the local EC Mission, Jacques Wunenberger, met with Deputy Foreign Minister Ivan Simonovic to push back. They urged the GoC to make more effort to assist Serbian refugees, who constituted the "most disadvantaged" part of Croatia's electorate. If the GoC would be willing to open more polling stations, the EC would be prepared to contribute 100,000 Euro to help get out the refugee vote. (Nobody knows precisely, but there are over 200,000 refugees still living in Serbia, a good percentage of which would be eligible to vote.) Simonovic resisted. While he thanked the OSCE and EC for their efforts

to get out the vote, the number of likely voters to turn out did not justify the resources required to open more polling stations. In the last national elections in 2000, only 1,500 people voted in Serbia, even fewer of those were refugees.

Comment

16. (C) Adding more polling stations in Serbia would not likely have affected the results of Croatian elections. But

the posture taken by authorities -- sometimes obfuscatory -- will invite criticism, and certainly rate a mention by ODIHR in what will otherwise be a fairly positive report of election procedures. When we made this point with the acting head of the MFA's Americas Desk, she was dismissive: "If it's not this issue, OSCE will find something else to complain about." We heard all sorts of excuses why no polling stations would be added. Primarily, the Croats complained that adding more stations would just cost too much money. And at least until last week, Vidis said defensively, the Election Commission had not requested more stations. When it finally did, the request was too vague -- and, more to the point, too late. He did not say it, but under the election law, the deadline to add polling stations passed last week.

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